

Now when we understand that God had planned this event from eternity past (*Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev 13:8*), we are also confronted with the realization that God was in absolute control of everything that was happening. In God's plan, the timing was perfect (*Gal 4:4*). The Romans were ruling in the Middle East and their method of criminal prosecution was crucifixion. It was according to God's design. He had chosen the Roman world as the stage of redemption and, therefore, the cross was no accident. It was perfect for what God had in mind.

## ROMAN CRUCIFIXION

Crucifixion was a well-known and commonly practiced means of executing criminals in the ancient world. Herodotus, the Greek historian tells us that the Persians used crucifixion as a form of extreme punishment. Other sources reveal the practice among the Assyrians, the Scythians, and the Thracians as well as among more distant European groups such as the Celts, the Germans, and the Britons. On one occasion, Alexander the Great had 2000 survivors of the siege of Tyre crucified along the shores of the Mediterranean.

In the Roman mind, crucifixion was reserved for rebellious slaves, mutinous troops, vile criminals, and insurrectionists against the state. Roman citizens, especially the upper class, were normally exempt from such an ignominious death no matter what their crime. The reason for this was that crucifixion was viewed not just as a means of death, but also as a means of portraying shame. Therefore only the most despicable were crucified. To be hung on a cross meant more than that a crime worthy of death had been committed. It meant that the accused was considered to be a lowly, vile, reprehensible person, in addition to being a criminal. He was not only bad—he was base.

It was for this reason that crucifixion was done in very busy, public settings. Part of the intent, obviously, was to deter others from committing such crimes. Gerald O'Collins, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, quotes the Roman Quintilian (*ca. 35-95 AD*) as saying, "Whenever we crucify the guilty,

the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this fear" (*vol 1, p 1208*). But the primary motive was to inflict the greatest amount of physical torment and public shame on persons of such reprehensible and detestable character. The Romans had more than retribution in mind. They were also expressing disgust and utter contempt.

## JEWISH PRACTICE

Although the Jews never practiced crucifixion as a means of capital punishment (except for a brief interval during the Hellenistic-Hasmonean Period), they did have a similar custom for expressing a high degree of contempt for undesirable persons. After a criminal had been put to death by some other means (i.e., the sword, stoning, etc.), the dead body would be strung up on a tree as a symbol of shame and dishonor. This public exposure gave the people an opportunity to express their venomous hatred for such a despicable criminal as they hurled their insults and mockery at the strung-up victim.

In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Earl Kalland makes this observation regarding the law and Israel's practice of hanging a condemned person on a tree (*Deut 21:22-23*):

Hanging the body exhibited the person to public humiliation. The criminal was under the curse of God...the judgment that takes a person's life out of the covenant community as a perpetrator of the worst kind of sin and displays that judgment by the humiliation of hanging his body in public shows that that person is under God's curse (*vol 3, pp 134-135*).

Stories are told in the American far west of hunting parties combing the hills for a killer cat that had been raiding the herds and flocks—and perhaps even maiming members of the community who lived in outlying areas. As the mountain lion was found and killed, the irate citizens of the community would often hang the carcass on a pole in the center of town for a time, in order to give the people an opportunity to vent their anger on the devil cat. Anyone who wished could spit on it, strike it with a stick, punch it with their fists and in a variety of other

ways express their anger at the despicable creature that had caused them loss and sorrow.

That is the same idea behind the Jewish practice of hanging a criminal's body on a tree. It was for this reason that Joshua hung the body of the king of Ai on a tree (*Josh 8:29*) and the bodies of the five kings of the southern confederacy on five trees (*Josh 10:26-27*). He was interested in more than their execution. Exposing them to public shame and ridicule was the primary motive for this practice.

## OUR SUBSTITUTE

The Apostle Paul quoted from this Jewish law (*Deut 21:22-23*) as he described for us the reason for Christ's death on the cross—"Christ hath redeemed us from *the curse* of the law" (*Gal 3:13*). You see, Christ not only died for our sins in a judicial sense, paying the required penalty for our crimes of disobedience; he also bore our "curse," the utter shame associated with our blatant disobedience against God.

When Jewish leaders pressed Pilate for the sentence of crucifixion, they were expressing their contempt for anyone guilty of the sin of blasphemy—the sin of which they were accusing Jesus. They were not only clamoring for Jesus' death. Knowing that the Roman idea of crucifixion was paramount to their practice of hanging on a tree, they would be satisfied with nothing less than having Jesus crucified. They wanted him put to shame. They wanted to demonstrate that he was cursed of God.

What they did not understand, however, was that Jesus was not dying for his own sin, but for their sins. As Paul, the converted Jewish Pharisee, would one day seek to explain to them, Christ was bearing the very shame associated with their sin of willful disobedience against God.

And this is something we must also grasp. Our sins of willful disobedience against a holy God are equally reprehensible. We are not only deserving of death, we are deserving of *shame*. You see, Pilate did not choose the cross for Jesus. Neither did the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin.

God chose the cross, for it was the perfect means of inflicting death through the shedding of blood, while also a way to express shame through public humiliation. No means of execution was ever more fitting to demonstrate the full punishment for sin. The Bible says "the wages of sin is death" (*Rom 6:23*), but it also shows that the awful horror of sin is in its ultimate shame—as it is written, "Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (*Gal 3:13*).

When the writer to the Hebrews appealed to the death of Christ as an example for his readers to persevere in the midst of their trials, he spoke of the death experience of Jesus this way,

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (*Heb 12:2*).

Jesus not only "endured the cross" as he suffered the unspeakable horror of crucifixion, he also despised "*the shame*" as he hung in the place of ridicule. On that fateful day, Jesus was dying for our sins, but he was also bearing our infamous shame as he hung on a tree. Yet in doing that he won an incredible victory over sin and death, so that he is now "set down at the right hand of the throne of God." That is the place of honor now occupied by the victorious Son of God. The death and shame were incredibly difficult, but the accomplishing of our redemption was the basis of his joy.

Let this thought sink deep down into your soul: If you are yet unsaved, you are under the curse of God, and thus deserving of everlasting shame. The curse is removed for none but those who recognize Jesus as their substitute, and fall at his feet confessing their sins. If you persist in your rebellious course, one day you will for sure hear these awful words—"Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire" (*Math 25:41*). The curse will never be removed. You will have to bear it as long as God lives. Everlasting shame and contempt will be the portion of every rebellious soul throughout the endless ages of eternity. □

—Dr. Dan Hayden

# Come just as you are

*“Him that cometh to me  
I will in no wise cast out” —John 6:37*

Cast yourself at once, in the simplest faith, upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. All of your preparation for eternity is entirely out of yourself, and in the Lord Jesus. Washed in his blood, and clothed upon with his righteousness, you may appear before God divinely, fully, freely, and forever accepted. The salvation of the chief of sinners is all prepared, finished, and complete in Christ (*Eph 1:6; Col 2:10*).

Again, I repeat, your eye of faith must be directed entirely out of and from yourself to Jesus. Beware of looking for any preparation to meet God in yourself. It's all in Christ. God does not accept you on the ground of a broken heart, or a clean heart, or a praying heart, or a believing heart. He accepts you wholly and entirely on the ground of the perfect atonement of his blessed Son. Cast yourself, in childlike faith, upon that atonement—“Christ dying for the ungodly” (*Rom 5:6*)—and you are saved!

Justification is a poor, law-condemned, self-condemned, self-destroyed sinner, wrapping himself by faith in the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is “unto all, and upon all them that believe” (*Rom 3:22*). He, then, is justified, and prepared to die and meet God, and he only, who casts from him the garment of his own righteousness, and runs into this blessed “City of Refuge”—the Lord Jesus—and hides himself there from the “avenger of blood” (*Josh 20*), exclaiming, in the language of triumphant faith: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (*Rom 8:1*).

Look to Jesus, then, for a contrite heart; look to Jesus for a clean heart; look to Jesus for a believing heart; look to Jesus for a loving heart; and Jesus will give you all.

One faith's touch of Christ, and one divine touch from Christ, will save the vilest sinner. Oh, the dimmest, most distant

glance of faith, turning its languid eye upon Christ, will heal and save the soul. God is prepared to accept you in his blessed Son, and for his sake he will cast all your sins behind his back, and take you to glory when you die.

Never has the Lord Jesus rejected a poor sinner who came to him empty and with “nothing to pay” (*Luke 7:42*). God will glorify his free grace in your salvation, and will therefore save you—**just as you are**, “without money and without price” (*Isaiah 55:1*). Paul immediately responded to the anxious jailor who asked what he must do to be saved—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (*Acts 16:31*).

No matter what you have been, or what you are, plunge into “the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness” (*Zech 13:1*), and you shall be clean, “washed whiter than snow” (*Psalms 51:7*). “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (*Isaiah 1:18*). Heed no suggestion of Satan, or of unbelief. Cast yourself at the feet of Jesus, and if you perish, perish there! Oh no! perish you never will, for he promised, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (*John 6:37*). And his blessed invitation is, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (*Matt 11:28*). Let your reply be, “Lord, I come! I entwine my feeble, trembling arms of faith around thy cross, thy death, thyself, and if I die, I will die, cleaving, clinging, looking unto thee!”

So act and believe, and you need not fear to die. Looking the Saviour in the face, you can look death in the face, exclaiming with good ol' Simeon, “Lord, now let me depart in peace: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” (*Luke 2:29*). My prayer is that you and I, through rich, free, and sovereign grace, will meet in heaven, and unite together in exclaiming, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!” (*Rev 5:12*). □

*Just as I am without one plea,  
But that thy blood was shed for me,  
And that thou bidst me come to thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!*

*Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind—  
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,  
Yea, all I need in thee to find—  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!*

## the gospel

The gospel of Christ is good news of pardon to the guilty, addressing all as equally guilty before God. It reveals an atonement sufficient for all; and everyone is commanded to receive it as a faithful saying, that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (*1 Tim 1:15*).

The gospel is addressed to those who are “far from righteousness” (*Isa 46:12*); who are poor, and blind, and naked; who have no money to purchase salvation, no merit to recommend them to the favor of God (*Isa 55:1; Luke 7:42*).

Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (*Matt 9:13*). If we are not sinners, we have nothing to do with the gospel; and if we are sinners, let us not reject the counsel of God against ourselves, by vainly supposing that anything about us gives us a peculiar claim to his favor, or by imagining that our sins are too great to be forgiven. The thief upon the cross was saved by faith in Jesus, and none shall enter heaven in any other way. Our only plea is this—**“God be merciful to me a sinner.”**

Although the Scriptures are so clear on this subject, it is a stumbling-block and foolishness to the great body of those who hear the gospel. It offends their pride to be put upon a level with the outcasts of society; surely, they think, some difference will be made; but they err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor understanding the malignity of sin or the grace of God.

They view salvation as a kind of bargain which God proposes to make with his creatures, that on certain conditions he will accept them; while in fact it is the message of reconciliation, equally addressed to all mankind, declaring that a full atonement for sin has been made upon the cross, and inviting every sinner of Adam's race instantly to approach God through Christ.

When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, it was a remedy equally adapted for all who had been bitten (*Num 21:8; John 3:14-15*). By looking to the serpent the patient was healed; and in reference to this emblem, Christ, indiscriminately addressing all mankind, says, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else”—“a just God and a Saviour” (*Isa 45:21-22*). □

## hung on a tree

*“Christ hath redeemed us from the CURSE of the law, being made a CURSE for us: for it is written, CURSED is every one that HANGETH on a TREE”*

—Galatians 3:13

Have you ever thought about why Jesus had to die on a cross? An altar on some mountain top might have been more fitting from an Old Testament point of view. In fact, that is what God arranged for Abraham in the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac (*Gen 22*). Or why didn't the religious leaders just stone Jesus to death as they did Stephen sometime later (*Acts 7*)? After all, that was the means of capital punishment in Israel, and Pilate seemed willing to give them permission for that (*John 18:31-32*). But the rulers of the Jews wanted more than death. What was it that caused them to press Pilate for the crucifixion of Jesus? It seems that the cross was destined to be God's altar of sacrifice, not a pile of rocks.

The Jews have always had a problem with that. How could Jesus be the Messiah and die as a criminal on a Roman cross? For them, that is too much to accept. Almost any other type of death would have had more dignity than that.

Consider the fact that crucifixion is, without question, the most humiliating and degrading form of public death ever devised. First of all, it was a very slow, agonizing death. Often it would last for days as the victim died more from suffocation than from bleeding. Furthermore, hanging naked in public along some well-traveled road added immensely to the sense of shame. Fully exposed like a carcass hanging on a rack, the victim experienced long hours of pain with an endless time of humiliation. Crucifixion was not only ugly, it was inhuman.